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Philosophical concepts of man in the context of medical sciences

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Abstract

Introduction: The search for answers to questions about human reality combines philosophy with science. The analysis of trends shaping medical science shows how strongly they are embedded in certain philosophical movements. And although referring to the philosophical assumptions of theories adopted in medicine and health sciences, especially for practitioners, may seem like an unnecessary effort, it is justified and sensible. An in-depth understanding of the impact, that philosophical concepts of man have had on the shaping of medicine and the organization of health care, gives us the opportunity to improve our actions.

Objective: The article will present the biomedical and holistic paradigms of medical sciences. Another aim is to identify movements and philosophical conception of man, which contributed to the formation of these paradigms.

Conclusions: The article presents two philosophical concepts of man: monistic and dualistic. Each of these concepts has a big influence on the shaping of paradigms functioning within the medical sciences. Understanding these relationship is especially important for those, who are involved in medical or nursing practice. The philosophical concepts of man shape not only

our way of understanding medicine or nursing as scientific disciplines. Understanding the theoretical foundations of concepts of man is especially important in making a moral assessment of our actions.

Introduction

The issue of human understanding, attempts to answer the question of who he is and what therefore will serve him, inextricably linked world of philosophy (metaphysics) with the world of science (Possenti, 2007). While each of these scientific disciplines provides us with valuable information, the scope of knowledge obtained through them varies. There are also different ways of exploring the reality, which have appeared in philosophy and left a mark on sciences the subject of which is human being.

The aim of the article is to present some philosophical concepts of man appearing at the very beginning of the history of our rational reflection on reality. The author also aims to identify specific paradigms in the field of medical sciences, which are derived from the philosophical movements presented in the article.

As it turns out conceptions of man, formed within certain philosophical trends, changes not only our understanding of medicine as a science, but ultimately decides about the specifics of working with the patient, helping to generate the criteria used in the moral assessment of medical interventions.

1. Selected philosophical concepts of man

Today in philosophy there is a large variety of ways to answer the question of what man is. Currents that presently strongly affect science are mainly those initiated by Descartes (concepts of consciousness), E. Cassirer's (culture concept), E. Durkheim (sociological concept), C. Levi-Strauss (structuralist concept) or by K. Marx (evolutionary concept) (Maryniarczyk, 1995).

The history of philosophy provides us with knowledge of how the ancient Greeks saw the whole reality and how they explained the existence of all beings. It should be emphasized that the ways of philosophizing and understanding human reality over the next centuries up to the present day, basically refer to the achievements of ancient thinkers (Maryniarczyk, 1995). The ideas of the first philosophizing naturalists, as well as the more mature philosophical concepts of Plato - all of them underlie the contemporary understanding of life sciences, including medicine.

1.1. Monistic concept - man as an aggregate of parts

The first philosophizing naturalists at the turn of the 7th and 6th centuries before Christ, undertaking the task of understanding the reality that surrounded them, directed their entire cognitive effort to finding what would be the basis of everything that exists.

The search for the first element *arché* concerned the natural world, and this task was enabled by sensory cognition, an empirical method (Maryniarczyk, 1995). The first philosophers felt that the explanation of the world demands the recognition of the existence of a material particle *physis* (nature), from which everything arises (Zdybicka). For Thales of Miletus the first element was water, for Anaximenes it was air, in turn, for Empedocles it was a mixture of air, fire, water and earth. There were also concepts of Anaximander (*ápeiron*) or Pythagoreans, for which the basis for the existence of all was the number; of Anaxagoras (world as a mixture of homogeneous material elements, Ordered by *Nóús* – mind), as well as Leucippus and Democritus, who said that the world is composed of indivisible atoms, which, thanks to movements fill the void (mechanistic materialism) (Pańpuch, 2015, Zdybicka).

Typical of all these ways of understanding reality was treating it as a homogeneous aggregate of particles. In turn both: inanimate, as well as animated beings are a proper composition, a proportion depending on the order and harmony of one, exactly the same material – first element. The reason of existence of animated beings was the first element, which has the power to animate. Beings are therefore the sum of the particles. Man, according to the vision of the first philosophers, has neither his individuality nor any internal principle of his unity – human beings distinguishes from the rest of the cosmos only the external composition of these particles, which in a different way form the other elements of the world (Maryniarczyk, 2007).

There are contemporary opinions pointing to the fact that it is unreasonable enough to say that the beginnings of the history of philosophy are materialism in the strict sense. This way of thinking on reality rather resulted from the inability to accurately formulate the first observation of philosophers, and concepts of this type should rather be linked to stoics (Pawlikowski, 2007; Zdybicka).

The first philosophers used also the concept of the soul. This happened, when the concept of the *arché*, understood as a first element, began to be distinguished from the concept of the *arché* understood as a first principle – the causes of movement, changes. This gave rise to the overcoming of the monistic conception of reality and the entire effort of philosophers focused

on searching for the causes of changes, hence the ideas of Heraclitus, Empedocles, Diogenes of Apollonia and Anaxagoras (Czyżewski, Gondek, & Mazierski). *Logos* (reason), love – hate, *pneuma* (air) and *Noús* (mind) are a kind of principle that organizes matter and sets it in motion. There is no doubt, however, that these principles are only a feature of the material first element (Krapiec; Maryniarczyk, 2007; Zdybicka). The problem of determining the cause of changes was limited to the issue of searching for the rationality of the material world – the principle of ordering material particles, in accordance with the equally material, because coming from the first element, particle of motion: "The whole mechanism of the world consists in assembling and unfolding the first elements (ἀρχή), and the only driving force behind this action is matter endowed with motion-life." (Czyżewski et al.). Reality is therefore material and all mechanisms occurring in it arise thanks to it. This view was related to the beliefs of ancient doctors about the occurrence of diseases and health disorders, and we can now define it as biological mechanicism. Erasistratus of Ceos, educated in the Alexandrian school of medicine (250 BC), probably knowing the mechanism of action of the human heart, claimed that it is responsible for the movement of air and fluids in the human body (Wnuk, 2007). Although Asclepiades of Bithynia (1st century AD) was convinced that the cause of the occurrence of diseases in the human body is the disorder within the physical parameters of atoms (pathology of organic atomism), he applied rather to the generally applicable rules based on the theory of humoral physiology (Wnuk, 2007).

1.2. Dualistic concept of man

The beginnings of seeing in the human soul the reasons of his life, order and harmony can be observed in the history of philosophy since the time of Socrates. However, his student, Plato, is the philosopher who should be credited with developing and refining a concept that will permanently appear in philosophy and culture.

Plato believed that only what is immutable, general and eternal can be the subject of valuable cognition. Only what is immaterial meets such criteria (ideas) (Maryniarczyk, 2007). For Plato, only ideas are real beings, and the sensual world is only their reflection, the opportunity to remember what the soul has lost access to. Therefore, all material reality, which is undergoing constant change, was not only not cognitively worthy according to Plato, but something much worse than the world of eternal ideas. Therefore, all material things are completely different from what is spiritual (Kowalczyk 2009; Maryniarczyk, 2007).

Such a vision of reality has certain consequences for the understanding of man. According to Plato, man is only something that is immaterial - man is the soul (Maryniarczyk, 2007; Pańpuch, 2007). The soul is capable of recognizing in the material reality the reflection of an idea, because it is a divine idea itself. The soul is therefore eternal and immortal, and its presence in the body is something temporary and is a punishment (Krapiec, 2005; Plato, 1999). A mortal body, that is subject to change, is a prison for the soul, something extremely different and inferior from it. The soul functions according to different rules and is itself the principle of being. Staying soul in the material world is a form of repentance and purification that can be accomplished by: turning the soul towards the world of the idea by remembering what it has seen before being placed in the body, turning away from what is sensual and lust and subjecting the senses to the power of reason (Pańpuch, 2007). A perfect soul with a divine origin needs philosophy and harmony between her and the body, but not because of the well-being of the whole understood man, but only because of the possibility of the soul's liberation from the body (Kowalczyk 2009; Maryniarczyk, 1995). The soul is simply pure consciousness, and what comes from the body: feelings, desires are the cause of suffering, illness and evil. Man's life is the life of the soul, whose sense is to return to the world of ideas (Pańpuch, 2007).

2. The biomedical and holistic paradigm in medical science

The concept of the paradigm, which is commonly understood as everything that according to the general representatives of a selected scientific field should be included in it, the philosophy of medicine assigns several elements (Pędziwiatr, 2003). According to M. Pędziwiatr, the components of this concept are, i.a.:

- 1) the scope of research in the field of medical sciences, thanks to which it is possible to distinguish what is non-medical;
- 2) the meaning of concepts that are fundamental to medicine;
- 3) leading medical theories;
- 4) experimental and theoretical research methods;
- 5) values that are recognized in institutional and non-institutional systems, including deontologies and professional ethics of medical employees (Pędziwiatr, 2003).

Particularly lasting paradigms of modern medicine are the reductionistic paradigm, also known as biomedical and holistic paradigm, also in socioecological terms (Pędziwiatr, 2003;

Ślusarska, Dobrowolska & Zarzycka, 2013). The paradigms that currently prevail in the medical sciences emerged thanks to certain philosophical movements, which had their origins in ancient times. In the further part of the article, quite general description of specific paradigms will be presented, with the historical context of their origin and development, an indication of the fundamental differences between them and their consequences for medical sciences.

2.1. The biomedical paradigm (reductionistic)

This paradigm has been in force in the medical sciences since the nineteenth century. The return of medical thought to this specific view of the reality of the organic world is due, however, to the activity of R. Descartes, who lived much earlier (1596-1650). Developing over centuries and present due to scientific discoveries in the times of Descartes, a strong trend in understanding organisms as machines governed by hydrostatic laws, supported the philosopher's conceptions (Wnuk, 2007). Descartes, trying to overcome certain problems appearing in metaphysics, proposed his own way of understanding reality through the distinction of *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. So the world of matter has been clearly separated from the world of spirit (Ślusarska et al., 2013). The task of science is not to discover the truth anymore, but to take over the world of nature, which will be possible thanks to the knowledge of physical laws. Descartes had great hopes in medicine, because thanks to her the mechanistic theory of nature would create the possibility of discovering and explaining the cause of disease. The human body is, according to his concept, *res extensa*, something that, unlike the human mind, is subject to exactly the same physical and mechanistic laws as the rest of the natural world (Pędziwiatr, 2003). Thus, the human or animal organism is nothing more than a machine that can be compared to the clock wound up and for which the first stimulus of action is the one given to it by the Creator (Wnuk, 2007). These theories gave rise to many other concepts of researchers in the field of medical sciences. A special inspiration was for J. O. de La Mettrie (1709-1751), who in his deliberations went further than Descartes, and not only referred to the human body as a machine, but the whole human being. He also states that all activity of the human soul is the result of the processes taking place in his body, and therefore, man is only a material being (Wnuk, 2007). La Mettrie's views are essentially similar to the understanding of the human body by the first ancient physicians, who saw in it a mechanism, working thanks to the material principle of movement. And despite the fact that he avoided the problem of the discord between the soul and the body, so characteristic of the philosophy of Plato and Descartes, he returned to the thoughts of the first philosophizing

naturalists (Opoczyńska-Morasiewicz, 2002; Wnuk, 2007). This initiated the appearance of many reductionist concepts of man, in which he was understood as a hydraulic, electrical machine (or as it is today - cybernetic) (Wnuk, 2007). The whole process was intensified due to the works of I. Newton, whose mathematical description of physical phenomena provided a theoretically coherent vision of the world and caused a scientific revolution. Positivism has set the direction of research in all fields, including medical sciences, which was finally confirmed by the discoveries of L. Pasteur (Pędziwiatr, 2003; Ślusarska et al., 2013). Medicine began to dynamically develop technologically, and conducted research provided valuable information on the causes of diseases and disorders. Unfortunately, due to the great interest in conducting scientific research by a part of the medical community, “the ontology of the disease” was developed (Pędziwiatr, 2003). It is no longer the patient's person, together with his complex existential context, that is the central interest of the doctor, but the discovery of the disorder, its detailed description and explanation (Ślusarska et al., 2013). Techniques and rapid development of various medical specialties additionally supported the search for health disorders at the level of the body's functioning, making it difficult to look at the patient's situation in a comprehensive way. In turn, scepticism and nihilism contributed to the rejection and recognition of the sources of information and treatment methods that were not valuable, which were not subject to verification using criteria developed on the basis of the accepted science model (Pędziwiatr, 2003). In the reductionist paradigm the patient is objectified, reduced to the rank of a mechanistically functioning organic system, whose working can be explained by revealing the details of the acting of its part. Such medicine, which in the classical sense was also an art, loses its practical dimension and violates the ethical order that prevails in it, thus generating many moral problems (Pędziwiatr, 2003; Ślusarska et al., 2013).

2.2. The holistic paradigm

It is pointed out that the roots of the holistic paradigm are: the concept of hypocritical medicine and the founding of Chinese medicine. This paradigm developed thanks to the current of Renaissance humanism and is strongly based on the currently widely accepted general theory of systems (Ślusarska et al., 2013). This theory captures reality in categories of organized complexes, each of which is not a simple sum of others, but is something qualitatively different and more perfect. According to this theory, naturally occurring phenomena take place within the hierarchy of systems and each system is an almost autonomous organism, parts of which are subordinate to the whole and affect the other

elements. The general theory of systems indicates that every living organism should be understood as a system in which continuous dynamic processes of self-regulation are carried out. That processes allow to balance the factors of the internal and external environment with respect to the system (Ślusarska et al., 2013). This concept allows to appreciate the multiplicity and complexity of the human environment, and human health is understood as a state of equilibrium between people. The disease is not static and it is perceived as the effect of disturbed relationships between human-environment systems (Ślusarska et al., 2013). An unquestionable achievement of applying this paradigm to the world of medical science is a break with extreme reductionism, searching for the causes of diseases and health disorders only in the pathologies of the functioning of the human body. Expanding the perspective of understanding health allows to consider a much larger number of variables affecting the patient's condition. This has radically changed the image of medicine, whose task is also to promote health and care for the patient's well-being.

The socioecological model of health is an extension of the holistic paradigm. This model also refers to the theory of living systems and postmodernism, and the impulse of its emergence is a rebellion against the rationalization of medicine and against cultural changes in the form of unification, globalization and consumerism (Ślusarska et al., 2013). A novelty in the proposed, extended socioecological model is the conviction that dynamic interactions between internal elements and external factors are the source of specific system structures and that any division of the system destroys its features. This concept also emphasizes the human position in relation to other systems of living organisms and the world of nature (Ślusarska et al., 2013). An attempt to characterize health within this paradigm has been presented in the form of the Mandala of Health, in reference to the traditions of Far-Eastern and Chinese medicine. Balance within the system perceived in this way can be preserved or disturbed at any level, from the molecular to the ecosystem (Ślusarska et al., 2013).

The literature also indicates that the holistic paradigm is derived from the tradition of hypocritical understanding of medicine and goes back to the philosophy of Hylozoists, Plato and Aristotle. The disease was the result of a disturbance of harmony between man and nature, therefore a good health condition must be expressed in the subordination of man to divine laws and laws of nature (*physis*) (Pędziwiatr, 2003).

The holistic paradigm of health, both in its basic and extended socioecological model, undoubtedly contributed to the refinement of the reflection on the multitude of factors conditioning the good health of a human being. Thanks to it, there has been a change in the

understanding of the doctor-patient relationship, in which the patient regains his subjective position and assumes responsibility for the treatment process, which was almost completely reduced in the biomedical paradigm. However, the human concept still remains problematic. Undoubtedly, it is devoid of the signs of monism in the materialistic version, but the reference to the observations of the first doctors may involve the need to face the vision of the person as a kind of mechanism. The theory of systems, which is the core of the interpretation of reality in this paradigm, describes not only the natural world, but also living organisms, as sets of elements. Although organisms are not just simple sums of these elements, these beings are subject to the laws of nature, and the reason for their existence are mutual interactions. Also, the context of the socioecological model creation, which is a rebellion against scientism, reveals a turn towards individuality, enhances the sphere of the psyche and intangible factors constituting the human being. Thus, a human being, rather than the whole, is a certain aggregate of elements fundamentally different from each other, some of which function strongly within organic and material subsystems, while others constitute different spaces of what is immaterial, spiritual and psychological in man. This discrepancy is particularly visible in the concept of Mandala of Health, in which different subsystems have to balance, which is the health condition of the whole system. It seems, therefore, that, just like the direct inspiration for the emergence of the biomedical paradigm, first was the Cartesian dualism, and then the turn towards the monistic concept, reducing the human being to the material elements – in the case of the holistic paradigm, the impulse, which was the desire to overcome reductionism, ultimately led to the vision of man as an organized system of differing particles, similarly to the concept of Descartes.

Summary

The history of philosophy shows us undoubtedly how important it is to undertake the task of rational reflection on reality, and especially on human being. The philosophical thought was not free from errors, but only such fields as medicine allow us to imagine how harmful the consequences of improper perception of human reality can be. The philosophical movements of the previous centuries are strongly affecting our way of understanding medicine, not only in the theoretical aspect, but especially in the dimension of *praxis*. To overcome these negative dependencies, it is worth to refer and use the Aristotelian-Thomistic concept of reality, revealing an important and still valid truth about man – a person.

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